

Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: Of Poetic Subject and Style: A Critical Analysis of Davidson Iwunze's *A Spring of Longings*

Luke Ndudi Okolo

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Chioma Emelone

Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

Abstract

From classical Greece and Rome through the annals of various world literatures, poesy has been held to be an art charged with utilitarian functions. It is this role that Aristotle, Horace, Sidney, and others have variously defended in their treatises. On the African landscape, the case is no different. From traditional to modern eras, poetry has been celebrated for its social functions, especially in pleasing and shaping the society. Writers of each phase of Nigerian poetry (including prose fiction and drama) have observed the idea that their craft is for the social good, and as such directed their works towards that end. They have always raised critical issues that affect their tribal and larger national existence. Dishearteningly, in recent times, some critics have raised alarm that later generation of Nigerian writers have abandoned their traditional call and veered around, headed to drown in eroticism or “fleshly” art. It is also alleged that contemporary Nigerian poets have also reneged on the principles guiding their art resulting in “jigsaw puzzles” and mere “versified intelligibilities” as poetry. That implies repudiation and murder of truth, beauty, and reason, which for ages, have been the guiding spirit, the effulgence of poetic musing. A study of selected poems of Iwunze's in *A Spring of Longings* (2021) shows that he makes no significant attempt at bringing lofty matters to the table. The volume is replete with fancy, ephemerality, and elegiacs, turning blind eyes on enormous and serious political, social, economic, religious and cultural subjects that threaten the entire polity. Some of his stylistic experimentations are mere fragmentations and unacceptable to the principles of poetic composition. These reaffirm the critical judgement of Nnolim and Anyokwu that later generation of Nigerian poets are fleshly, careless, and lost.

Keywords: *Contemporary, Literariness, Poetry, Style, Subject*

Introduction

Since the birth of modern (written) African poetry in the 1930s and 1940s by a group of diaspora poets who were under intense feeling of “their physical exile in Africa” (Kwadzo Ebli Senanu and Theo Vincent 9), and worried by “colonisation and the poor opinion that the rest of the world appeared to have of the abilities of the black man” (Donatus Nwoga

121-2), it has waxed very strong to earn itself recognition among world literatures. The development has been gradual and consistent, from phase to phase, with each leaving remarkable aesthetic and socio-political imprint on the sand of time.

The pioneer poets established written African poetry from their experiences of the traditional

African oral form with the major aims of “achieving political independence of their countries from colonial rule, of forming the minds of their countrymen for a new Africa” (Donatus Nwoga 123). Their poetry is adjudged to be less literary for lacking in poetic complexity, what we may call “the making of poetry”. They are succeeded by their modernist counterparts who wrote in the 1950s and produced authentic African poetry by mixing foreign ingredients with the local to make a complex literary meal, “less easy to understand and, in general, of higher imaginative intensity” (Nwoga 143). Their poetry was seen as a conscious search for techniques from native traditional setting “as a means of authenticating their sensibility” (Senanu and Vincent 12). After this phase came the third group (phase), often referred to as the Third Generation African poets.

The third generation African poets, though have much in common with the preceding set (modern poets) in terms of local colour, yet they repudiated the poetry of their predecessors as extension of European (colonial) grip on Africa. For that reason, they took a similar but different path – an attempt to revolutionalise the polity. Christopher Anyokwu describes their poetry as being characterised by “limpidity of diction, a clear

class consciousness or poetic ideology, a sense of propaganda, instrumental orchestration of poetry, otherwise known as ‘performance poetry’, antiphony, the adroit incorporation of indigenous oral poetic forms” (<https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-poetry-and-the-lost-careless-generation-part-1/>).

African poetry gained full maturity with this generation of poets, who are seen as radical and revolutionary both in subject and style as guided by the ideological objectives of the poets.

However, African poetry seems to have lost focus and pedestal and makes a bad fall from its exalted throne with the launch of the fourth generation poets. They seem to continue with the standards of their predecessors, but their works are marred on various fronts. Knowing the fact that Nigerian writers contribute to a large extent to the literary productions of Africa and its classification across genres, it is, then, convenient to assert that Nigerian fourth generation poets and their poetry share in that quality. The Nigerian poets of this era are often lambasted by critics for being base, infantile, and “unpoetic”. Contemporary, in the context of this paper, refers to the later crop of this generation of Nigerian poets – those that published since the beginning of the 21st century. One of the poetry of that category of

poets is Davidson Iwunze's *A Spring of Longings* (2021).

Justification of the Study

Davidson Iwunze's *A Spring of Longings* is still a virgin volume of poetry among the recently published works in Nigeria. Holding firm the creed that "Critics are defenders of poets, and the commentator on their works" and that criticism deals with the worth or value of art, its importance, its merit, its service or use to humanity" (Nnolim 4 & 5), the researcher finds it necessary to evaluate the poetry volume in the light of its subject and style. That verdict is necessary to guide both the musing of the poet and the reader's taste, and stop attempts at subverting poetic truth and reason for beauty, or vice versa. This is necessary as no other critic has given it that attention.

Research Objective

An excellent piece of literature is, or what could be termed a good literature, is expected to satisfy two needs; the primordial constituencies of every art that underscore its relevance – it is that of *pleasure and profit*; that is, its pleasing (entertainment) and usefulness/utilitarian (teaching) functions. This implies that an art does not solely amuse us, it imparts in us; and any art short of these is

defective. This work is aimed at interrogating and making a judicial evaluation of *A Spring of Longings* as patterns its poetic aesthetics vis-à-vis its social relevance. The interrogation is to make vivid the merits/demerit of the poetry collection in the light of its poetic excellence or literariness and the social relevance (usefulness).

Theoretical Approach

It is the view of Horace the Roman critic that a poet has two inalienable tasks, an indissoluble marriage: "to blend in one the delightful and the useful" (Allan Gilbert 139). Considering this age-long held role of the poet, the moral approach is found useful in giving adequate insight to the two issues of "form and content" of *A Spring of Longings*. It is a criticism rooted in the "classical" treaties spanning various periods, hinged on the idea that the importance of literature does not lie only on its way of saying something (its literariness), but also in what it says, which bothers on the premises of value and reason. It is a criticism that evaluates literature "not merely in its way of saying, but also in what it says" (Wilbur Scott 23); the what of meaning.

The Making of Poetry

The making of poetry is one of the most contested and abused of the literary craft in

recent times. In spite of its various kinds, some experience and experimentation are considered quite peculiar to poetry as a genre of the literary art. From the Victorian critic John Stuart Mill's interrogation of the real province and boundary between poetry and other arts, we come to realise the basic confines of poetic composition. Mill's judgement is that the origin, the spring and aim of poetry is "to act upon the emotions" (Meyer Howard Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt 1140). In an expanded view, he states:

Ever truth which a human can enunciated, every thought, even every outward impression, which can enter into his consciousness may become poetry, when shown through any impassioned medium; when invested with the colouring of joy, or grief, or pity, or affection, or admiration, or awe, or even hatred or terror; and, unless so coloured, nothing, be it as interesting as it may, is poetry (1142)

It is on account of the above that William Wordsworth the Romanticist calls it a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings (emotions) under a condition for best crafting – tranquility. It is, therefore, like Mill says, "the natural fruit of solitude and meditation" (Abrams and Greenblatt 1143). It should inspire psychological healing, sorrow, joy, hope, brotherliness, etc in both the poet and the audience, but especially the latter. The idea and

its expression have to be "particular, precise, and firm", argues Matthew Arnold; hence the need for the crafting – encoding of various thoughts and impressions in special linguistic forms such as metaphor, symbols, images, and so on.

Poetry is not made by metrical lines, or the formal features of lines, rhyme, and stanzas. It is much deeper than that. Many who claim to be poets are mere aspirants. Most of them scribble what is best called "prosetry" – prose presented in lives. Some others, the first class scribblers could be awarded the magnified title of versifiers. Charles Nnolim, the revered critic of African literature emphasises:

A poem should be like a many layered cake; a poem should yield its sweet juices; the more you read it, the more you get out of it. Simplicity is not really a virtue in poetry. A poem is a symbol, a poem is metaphorical language so that simplicity is an anathema to good poetry...a good brilliant of minds (Chibueze Prince Orie 96).

Poetry is a potent and the most beautiful artillery forged in the hearth of best craftsmen. He finds himself unworthy and declines the toga of a poet, but a versifier. It follows, then, that verses are not poetry. A verse can qualify to ascend the high prestige of poetry only if the piece is impassioned enough with relevant and right linguistic embellishing that enables it to

act upon the emotion of the audience; it then becomes right words in the best place.

Subject and Style of Poetry

When we talk about subject of a work we refer to the issue treated; which idea caught the writer's attention; which matter is the writer concerned with? This is what is meant by subject, "which can usually be expressed in a word or two: old age, ambition, love" (Robert Anderson et al. 1250). The style of a work is "a technique of writing by which a literary writer distinguishes himself and expresses his view on the subject of his writing" (Luke Okolo 139). These two concepts have been subjects of heated debates among scholars since the ancient Greece, from Plato and Aristotle to Eliot and Richards of the 20th century, and still pique some sensibilities. For me, the debate has been laid to rest with Eliot's "Religion and Literature". However we look it, subject and style are two human eyes; each lies fitted in its own sockets on the same head with their meeting point lean and hidden within the skull. When one eye is defected or disabled, vision is obviously impaired. The deficiency of an eye does not only impact on the beauty of the one, it also affects the quality of vision. Therefore, soundness of a literary work, or what Eliot calls greatness of literature, is a measurement of the interdependent soundness of both.

The fourth generation of Nigerian poetry within which we find *A Spring of Longings* has received unfavourable criticisms on account of the two chosen grounds of this work. The poets and their poetry are seen as unserious and unworthy of any serious attention. This is contrary to Nnolim's view that a good work "should not only attract criticism, it should compel it" (Orie 92). He condemns the ideas of sex, wine, fun that fill recent Nigerian literatures, referring to the writers as "fleshly school". While admitting that these are social realities, he rather sues for reduction of such crafting, insisting that pleasure should not "supplant more serious challenges that the common man in Nigeria faces" (Orie 98-99). Christopher Anyokwu is actually bitter about their poetry. He sees the poets as a "lost/careless generation". In his bitterness about the poets and their poetry, he states:

...these pretenders lack the knowledge of life's important issues, when they do, their understanding of the issue of life is shallow and sophomoric. They have no idea of poetic technique whatsoever as their 'poetry' ranges between jigsaw puzzle and what has been described as "versified intelligibilities" – or the personification of inanities dressed in stanzaic patterning (<https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-poetry-and-the-lost-careless-generation-part-2/>).

He goes further to allege that their poetry is frosted with “play and fantasy, indeterminacy, decentered consciousness, the delegitimation of grand narratives of Truth, Beauty, and Reason”. His emphasis of truth, beauty and reason as a trinitarian unity in poetry underscores the necessity of a marriage of the duo of subject and style. It follows, therefore, that the grand error of the fourth generation poets (interpreting Nnolim and Anyokwu) is the separation of essentiality of subject from style or vice versa. That is to say, separating what is said from how it is said; or better still, separating how something is said (its sweetness or pleasure to the senses) from what has been said, their meaning and value implication, which we may see as its moral value.

The place of value in literary craft is an indispensable one. Attachment of no relevance to value is the worst weakness of “Art for art’s sake” that eventually murdered it at the altar of moral reasoning – value for literature. Reason, I dare say, is a fair partner in the totality of literary existence. It is unfair to contemplate displacing reason in any engagements known to be literature. Moral justification (poetic justice) is at the heart of poetry. It is in defence of that that Richards avers:

Anything is valuable which will satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or *more important* appetency; in other words, the only reason which can be given for not satisfying a desire is that more important desire will thereby be thwarted (36).

Now, the unresolved issue is discovering which of the two that outweighs the other – subject (bothering on value and reason) and style (bothering on literariness). Can one be preferred to another? Like in the case of the “Art for art’s sake” school that preferred to go for beauty of expression (literariness) and threw away the issue of value, could Nigerian poets afford to throw away the issue of value of their work to their society? Are they going to do “eyes right” against the eternal doctrine of *dulce et utile* of poetry? In the face of the prevailing social realities, what is the value of the poet to the society? Even though he is not an exponent of literary morality, T. S. Eliot has handed unbiased verdict between the two poles. He assertively pronounces that “the ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards” (Scott 43). He adduces the reason that a book could be harmful to the reading audience, even without the author and the reader being aware of it. He argues:

The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings whether we intend to be or not. I suppose that everything we eat has some other effect upon us than merely the pleasure of taste and mastication; it affects us during the process of assimilation and digestion; and I believe that exactly the same is true of anything we read (48).

In *Morning yet on Criticism Day: The Criticism of African Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Nnolim clearly states that “Art unaccompanied by criticism is dead art” (3). He clarifies the job of a critic as both judicial and social.

His function is to estimate and pass judgement on the value and quality of the work of art before him, he is a mediator between the specialist and the layman, between the work of art and its readership or audience (4).

As a critic, I have assumed my seat as a disinterested judge with the responsibility of dispensing justice; the task here is neither to condemn nor to praise. My duty is as Horace opines: to “teach the business and duty of a writer; show where his materials may be found; what it is that trains and moulds a poet; what becomes him, what does not; whither knowledge tends, and whither error (Gilbert 137). Admittedly, “a false or malicious

criticism had better never have been written” (Abrams and Greenblatt 1515) says Matthew Arnold. Objectivity is, then, the goal of a criticism and that I assure.

Iwunze’s *A Spring of Longings*, unobjectionably has some merits. It is unworthy of the dustbin. The paper quality and general formatting are really superb. However, on account of subject and style, it is overwhelmingly frosted with weaknesses. It is laced with erotica. The poet has found himself swooned by the prevailing spirit of the day into the pitfall of later Nigerian poets as Anyokwu and Nnolim allege. Out of the thirteen poems constituting the first part of the volume entitled “Melody”, eleven are erotica – expressions of insatiable sexual passions; all are about enjoyment of the flesh, though not without a little sense. However, the lesson therein is too weak for a balance the pile of passions in embodies. It is expected of such a poet to hearken to the voice of social necessity and create a balance like Marvell does with his metaphysical romance – “To His Coy Mistress” – in which he emphasises the shortness of man’s life/making hay while it shines. But that is not the case with Iwunze’s. In “Love (1)” for instance, a 28 line poem, he begins thus: “Nothing/Purifies the heart/Than nectar of kisses/Planted in dimples of a smile”

(line 1 – 4). The only take home is the resolution forming the last stanza: “The eyes roll in tears/ When they triumph/But swim in tears when they lose/Because love is a game of the heart”.

Even the third and fourth parts – “Mutation” and “Muffling” – containing six and seven poems respectively are tainted with romantic versifications, leaving only “Meditation” and “Memory” free of sensual infestation. But then, “Memory” contains only elegiacs lamenting deaths.

Iwunze lacks the balancing of the social realities in his poesy of *A Spring of Longings*. He is like a bird in flight; floating, ignorant of his environment. He is adrift in favour of sexual passions swallowing up his society. Therefore, he fails in his task as a poet, the watch dog of his time, to redirect their emotions towards lofty engagement on serious political, religious, and in fact, the social macrocosm of Nigeria. For instance, he is feebly/lame about the worst social evils of contemporary Nigeria such as terrorism, herdsmen menace, frauds of various kinds, stealing at high and low places, dearth of trust, ritual killing, malpractice, irresponsibility of public officials, cultural and religious extremism/depravity, and so on. That is cheer

poetic blindness, a monumental failure of the poet. It is expected of the muse to inspire the poet according to the incidents and challenges of the society, evenly. It cannot be partial and selective. However, the muse could be suppressed. So that failure is indictment on the poet, not the muse. He fails to forge a link between significant social realities and sexual fantasies.

Coming to his style, I cannot help but concur with Anyokwu that some of the poems are mere “jigsaw puzzles” and “versified intelligibilities...dressed in stanzaic inanities”. The poetic composition lacks the needed lustre of poetry that makes it food for the emotion, mover of the soul, luring and lulling. Stylistic defects contaminate some of the poems with taints of badness as “the loss of so much of the formal structure leads otherwise to tenuousness and ambiguity” (Richards 157). Some excerpts below will help.

Love (11)

Love
Is not a dream
About night of ecstasies

Love
Is not about apples
Plucked from the eyes’ twig

Love
Is not the artist's
Song of enchantment

Love
Is not candle light
In a room of pillow roses

Love
Is wandering alone
Along the fringes of fantasy
(19)

Where is metaphor? Where is personification? Where is allusion? Where is imagery? Where are the figures that condense poesy and stir emotion? They are virtually absent. While I will say that this mere versification is minimal, the worst stylistic disease that infests the poems with "badness" is fragmentation – the violation of formal features. Unarguably, every poet reserves the poetic licence, in more scholarly term, the stylistic right to breach some conventions in order to achieve a formula to his sense, or as his "signature". However, no poet should hide under the bogus guise of poetic licence to perpetuate anomaly and murder poetry. Some features are basic, and so are tagged formal structure of poetry; for example, lines and stanzaic forms. No matter whatever stylistic effect a poet employs, such shall not displace line (verse) and stanza as formal structure of poetry. Be that as it may, Iwunze is, I would aver, experimenting with whatever idea that comes to his mind that he

has some poems well-structured, some others infected and few dead or on life-support. For instance, "I Am the Song" is beautifully composed with formal structures of line and stanza observed, and intricate stylistic patterning. Each of the thirteen stanzas is made of three lines, where the first segment has three stanzas; the second four; the third and fourth three respectively. Below is the poem.

I Am the Song

I

I am not the grit
Kindling flames
In Australian forests

I am not the flame
Spreading nightmares
Above pristine dreams

I am not the forest
Of night masquerades
Seeking return of the ancestors

II

I am the moon
Invading and divulging
The darkness of their desires

I am the fragrance
Saturating across ruins
Of their deserted homes

I am the pebble
Of rains persistent
On dousing the flames

I am the song
Above echoes
Of nostalgic drums

III

I am not
The ant song
Of anthem of sting

I am not
The night song
Of thunderstorms

I am not
The bug song
Of bed stings

IV

I am
The song
Of revellers

I am
The psalm song
Of palm leaves

I am
The song minted
By tongues of the ancient
(45 – 46)
Without mincing words, this is a nice stylistic
deployment.

Uninterestingly, Iwunze's poems are crippled
and murdered with muddling and unacceptable
fragmentation. The following poems are
examples of the dead and infected.

Midnight
Tears doused
His dreams at midnight
Like mid-year rains

Sprouting tendrils of memory
Above the garden
Of a heart in the heart
Of mid-life flames
(41)

None of the lines can stand as a stanza as to
have seven stanzas of one line each. What do
we call that, then? Is that a one stanza poem or
a seven stanza one?

Burden

I

Battling for ballots
Masses as weavils

Enmesh in crumbs
Of taskmasters

II

Season of meditation
Illuminating echoes of the souls

Ensnared in the ethos of a nation
Besieged beyond its pathos!

III

Squatting as a toad
On the swampy road

We carry the loads
On our hurting backs
(49)

The above structure is strange to the art, and
does not pass acceptance test for poetic
stylistics. It is so because each of the two line-
structures cannot stand for a stanza. Elsewhere,
I note that "a line or poetic verse functions as a
sentence; a stanza as a paragraph; the poem a

complete writing or argument” (Akujobi and Makinde 109). This view of mine is eminently supported by Anderson et al. who state that the word stanza is an Italian word for “stopping place” or “place to rest”. In other words, you stop after expressing a complete thought or idea. But in the excerpt, we see that the thought of each of the previous two lines are completed with the succeeding two lines. Therefore, the experimentation is riddled with what is referred to as factory error in the mechanical parlance, and that is replicated in eighteen other poems.

Conclusion

Richards’ opinion that, “sometimes art is bad because communication is defective, the vehicle inoperative; sometimes because the experience communicated is worthless; sometimes for both reasons” (156) is instructive. Iwunze’s *A Spring of Longings* demonstrates some conscious effort to produce a novel collection of poetry using personal

experiences and social realities. But then, that effort is like a misfired shot as the poetry is marred on the double grounds of being more fleshly tilted than utilitarian; and deformed by unethical, inexplicable, and unacceptable stylistics deployment. As a greenhorn in poetic creativity, he is yet to wean in the intricacies of his calling, foremost as an artist, and specially, as a poet.

It is my kind observation that Iwunze’s failure stems from the fact that this volume is his virgin poetic musing. His poetic energy is quite appreciated, but he needs to marry his muse with the art of poesy, the consummation of both will yield great poetry from his artistic forge. He should not lose sight of the dual premises of poetry – profit and pleasure – in his poetic craft. Inasmuch as poetry is meant to act on human emotion, it should act for better and greater social good. Any poet he misses that point is bound to fail.

Works Cited

Anderson, Robert et al. *Elements of Literature: Sixth Course*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1989.

Anyokwu, Christopher. “Nigerian Poetry and the Lost/Careless Generation – Part 1” *The Guardian*. 11 September, 2016. [https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-poetry-and-the-lost-careless-](https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-poetry-and-the-lost-careless-generation-part-1/)

[generation-part-1/](https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-poetry-and-the-lost-careless-generation-part-1/). Accessed 20 August, 2022.

.... “Nigerian Poetry and the Lost/Careless Generation – Part 2” *The Guardian*. 18 September, 2016. [https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-](https://guardian.ng/features/nigerian-poetry-and-the-lost-careless-generation-part-2/)

- [poetry-and-the-lost-careless-generation-part-2/](#). Accessed 20 August, 2022.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Preface to Poems" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Volume 2). Abrams, M. H. and Greenblatt, Stephen. W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Eliot, T. S. "Religion and Literature" *Five Approaches to Literary Criticism*. Scott, Wilbur S. (Ed). Collier Books, 1979.
- Horace. "The art of Poetry" *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*. Gilbert, Allan H. Wayne State University Press, 1970.
- Iwunze, Davidson Chimezie. *A Spring of Longings*. Alpharld Publishers, 2021.
- Mill, John Staurt. "What Is Poetry" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Volume 2). Abrams, M. H. and Greenblatt, Stephen. W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Nnolim, Charles. *Literature, Literary Criticism and National Development*. University of Port Harcourt Press, 2012.
- *Morning yet on Criticism Day: The Criticism of African Literature in the Twentieth Century*. University of Port Harcourt Press, 2009.
- Nwoga, Donatus I. *West African Verse*. Longman, 1967.
- Okolo, Luke Ndudi. "Thematic and Stylistic Analysis of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. *Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 1 no. 3 (December 2016), pp.135-142.
- "The Structure of the Poem" *Literature-in-English: Fundamentals of Drama, Poetry and Prose*. Akujobi, Odochi and Makinde, Peter (Eds.). MIZomas, 2017.
- Orie, Chibueze Prince. *Charles E. Nnolim: Radar to African Literature – Biographia Intellectuale*. University of Port Harcourt Press, 2009.
- Richards, A. I. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.
- Senanu, K. E. and Vincent T. *A Selection of African Poetry*. Longman, 1976.
- **Luke Ndudi Okolo** is of the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and can be reached via: ln.okolo@unizik.edu.ng.
 - **Chioma Emelone** teaches at the Department of English Language and Literary Studies Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe and can be reached at: emelonechioma@gmail.com